

DeCamp Bus Line No. 66 From the Port Authority to Upper Montclair, N.J.



Billie Cohen

The DeCamp bus line originally started as a horse-drawn stage line in the late 1800s, running a route between Roseland and Newark, N.J. Back then, a round-trip journey took an entire day.

9 p.m., Jan. 29 Tuesday

Montclair, N.J., is a town of options. “There are three middle school choices, and they are all good,” said Robert Smith, a father of two and a professor at CUNY. A year ago, Mr. Smith and his wife moved there from the Bronx, because their children were nearing middle-school age, and they weren’t happy with city schools.

Although it was the major reason for the Smith family’s move, education is not the only category in which Montclair offers decent choices. The commute is another: residents have easy access to both the bus and the train. (And if they choose rail, they can select from among six train stations in the township.)

While the train is the more popular mode in the morning, the bus still has a strong following — especially at night — when it runs more frequently. Tuesday night’s bus at 9 p.m. was packed largely with professionals, couples and 20-something singles.

At the Port Authority, Patricia Cronin was first in line at the gate. She moved from Battery Park City to what she jokingly referred to as “the Upper West Side of the suburbs” 14 years ago. “Our son was a year old and we wanted to raise him in the suburbs,” she said.

The commute played a large role in where she and her husband considered living. “We took a map and looked at train schedules for Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North,” she said, explaining how she and her husband had narrowed their home search to Montclair. “I work long hours and my husband works in Midtown, and we didn’t want to commute more than one and a half hours all in.”

Ms. Cronin said that she used to take the train, but has switched to the bus because it offers more frequent and more convenient service in the evening. “Most of these buses will stop at whatever corner you ring.”

Last night’s certainly did. People signaled for personal bus stops every few minutes, and the bus easily pulled to the side of the charming, tree-lined residential main road. Despite the apparent ease of the post-rush-hour commute — peak times are a different, traffic-filled story — the DeCamp bus line has lost many passengers to New Jersey Transit’s Midtown Direct service.

“It’s affected us dramatically,” said Gary Pard, vice president of operations. “We used to run 9,400 passengers a day.”

In 2002, New Jersey Transit began rail service from Montclair to Midtown. “When that opened we dropped to 7,200 a day. We’ve since regained some of those and are back to 7,600 a day.” He acknowledged the convenience of the railroad and its imperviousness to traffic (bus delays, he said, are the most common complaint he hears), but attributed the slight rebound to the economy, the bus’s schedule, and people’s preference to avoid the hassle and expense of parking and driving.

“I’ve heard DeCamp has lost customers to the train, but I still struggle to get a seat on most days,” Ms. Cronin said. “But I think the bus is great.”

Nicholas Genchi is also a bus fan. “You have to pay for parking in Montclair,” he said. “Decamp runs on Grove Street; I don’t have to worry about parking, I live right on Grove.” An employee at HBO, Mr. Genchi, 25, recently bought a condo in Clifton, N.J., the town where he grew up. “I looked in Clifton, Lyndhurst, Rutherford, Bellevue,” he said. “I looked mostly for location but also for commute. Most places didn’t have bus or train stops as easily accessible as walking out the front door and walking to Grove Street.”

Robert and Sean, a couple who commute from the Flatiron District (and asked that their last names not be used), also conducted a thorough search before settling on Montclair three months ago. After rattling off a list of potential communities they had considered — Jersey City, Bronx, Yonkers, and “everywhere in New York City” — Sean said they wound up in Montclair “because we could get a plot of land for less than a one-bedroom in the city. Considerably less.” They also knew friends living there already, and the commute seemed painless.

“The commute was very important, but we probably didn’t know exactly what it’d be like,” Sean said. “It’s harder than we thought it’d be, but we’re just getting used to it.”

The change from their Brooklyn lifestyles and the complications of suburb-to-city traffic required an adjustment to their morning schedules. Robert now goes to work around 7 a.m. to avoid the rush, and Sean goes in late, around 9:30 a.m. They both travel home on the 9 p.m. bus.

One thing they've learned so far is that despite having two separate commuting methods, those options are inextricably linked. "When you commute from New Jersey, if one way is off, then all ways are affected," Sean noted. "So if the train is not running, the bus is overcrowded." He noted that the bus is often overcrowded regardless of the train's status. But in the end, even with all the pros and cons of both Montclair commutes, it's still better to have a choice.



Billie Cohen

Passengers lined up at the Port Authority to catch the No. 66 DeCamp bus to West Orange, N.J.

Commute Time

37 minutes

At a Glance

Thanks to pick-ups and drop-offs at nearly any requested corner along the route, DeCamp Bus Lines delivers Montclair-area residents almost to their doorsteps. Nevertheless, the company has lost riders to New Jersey Transit's Midtown Direct line. Montclair has six train stations for commuters to choose from, and the railroad isn't plagued by the same traffic delays that the bus is.

Where It Goes

The No. 66 bus line runs from the Port Authority to West Orange, N.J. It makes stops in Clifton, Montclair (including Montclair University), Upper Montclair, and West Orange.

Strategies

"Live on the beginning or middle of the bus route so you can get a seat," said Sean, a recent Brooklyn transplant to Montclair. "Standing is dangerous and we've seen people get thrown. The aisles get full, especially in the morning."

Trivia

DeCamp Bus Lines is the oldest privately-owned bus company in the country. "And proud of it," said Gary Pard, the vice president of operations, "despite the complaints." By the end of March, he expects the company's Web site to be revamped to include route maps, fare schedules, online customer service and the ability to send traffic notices to subscribers — the latter in the hopes of allaying the most common gripe, delays.